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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TAIPEI 001350

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/12/2019  
TAGS: [KDEM](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [ETRD](#) [TW](#)  
SUBJECT: U.S. BEEF IMPORTS NOT A MAJOR ISSUE IN YEAR-END  
LOCAL ELECTIONS

Classified By: AIT Director Bill Stanton. Reasons: 1.4 b/d

¶1. (C) Summary: During recent reporting trips to three counties in north and central Taiwan, PolOffs found little evidence the controversy over expanded imports of U.S. beef would be a major issue in upcoming local elections. Although the opposition Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) and even some leading figures in the ruling Kuomintang (KMT) have bitterly criticized President Ma Ying-jeou's administration for signing the beef accord, local politicians from both parties suggested the impact on December 5 elections would not be great. The lack of resonance among voters suggests the beef brouhaha might fade before long, if not before the elections, then soon thereafter. End summary.

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WHERE'S THE BEEF?  
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¶2. (U) For several weeks, the DPP and some high-profile KMT politicians, including the mayor of Taipei, have excoriated the Ma administration for agreeing to expand access for imports of U.S. beef products, including allegedly dangerous offal and ground beef. The DPP has supported calls for a public referendum to reverse the decision and has urged followers to participate in an anti-beef rally in Taipei on November 14. Leading politicians from both parties in the major urban areas of Taipei, Taichung and Kaohsiung have vowed a number of measures to prevent sales of the beef products in question.

¶3. (C) Yet during election reporting trips to Taoyuan, Hsinchu and Nantou counties November 5-10, PolOffs heard from local politicians across the partisan spectrum that beef would not be a major issue in year-end elections for county magistrates and city mayors outside major urban areas. Most did say, however, that DPP officials hoped to use it as one of the many examples they believed underlined the Ma Administration's incompetence.

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KMT SOLIDARITY AT LOCAL LEVELS  
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¶4. (C) Virtually all the local KMT party officials who spoke with PolOffs, and even a county magistrate candidate who had been expelled from the party, said they continued to support President Ma, who in places such as Hsinchu County remained popular despite some high-profile missteps in recent months. The KMT candidates said that if the DPP continued its attack on U.S. beef, they would still toe the administration's line that the government policies' highest priority was the health

of Taiwan's citizens. Their support was in marked contrast to Taipei Mayor Hau Lung-bin's early, high-profile opposition to the beef pact, with an emphasis on discouraging importers and Taipei stores/restaurants from selling the so-called risky items. Hau is not up for re-election until next year, but some political observers believe he took a strident position against the U.S. beef agreement to compensate for what they describe as an otherwise lacklustre performance as mayor.

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LOCAL DPP OFFICIALS RECOGNIZE LIMITS OF BEEF ATTACKS  
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15. (C) Although DPP Chairperson Tsai Ing-wen publicly denied allegations her party was attacking U.S. beef imports as a political ploy before the elections, some local opposition party leaders suggested otherwise. Taoyuan County DPP Chairman Hsieh Jui-ming acknowledged that beef was a political windfall for his party, whose platform consisted primarily of attacking KMT policies. Still, he believed that beef was not gaining much traction with voters, including his spouse. "I asked my wife yesterday if she would be willing to eat U.S. beef, including offal and ground beef. She said, 'Why wouldn't I?'" Moreover, Lee Wen-chung, the DPP magistrate candidate in Nantou County, stated he would not even mention beef during his campaign.

16. (C) Local officials from both major parties stressed that voting in magistrate and mayoral elections was largely based on candidates' personalities and local loyalties. One

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candidate in Nantou said lack of interest in beef was due to the absence of a local beef lobby. In all of the campaign posters and advertising seen by PolOffs in the three counties, only one brief television spot by a DPP candidate in Hsinchu focused on beef. (Note: It was running at night on ESPN and Star Sports during reruns of the final World Series game and a L.A. Lakers match. End note.)

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NO LOCAL RESTRICTIONS ON BEEF  
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17. (C) When incumbent county magistrates in Hsinchu and Nantou Counties, one of whom was up for reelection, were asked about administrative controls to counter import and distribution of U.S. beef offal and ground beef, they said they did not plan to impose any restrictions or inspections at the local level. At most, they said, they would request grocery stores to segregate beef based on points of origin.

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COMMENT: THE END OF OFFAL WARS?  
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18. (C) Regardless of the media attention in Taipei, beef does not appear to be a decisive issue in upcoming local elections, at least not in the three counties visited by PolOffs. Voter ennui in those counties toward beef appeared to have settled in. Elsewhere, politicians such as the KMT Mayor of Taipei and DPP Central Headquarters officials, may continue to try to leverage beef safety concerns for partisan gain; the upcoming Taipei street protest could rekindle passions and an extended referendum effort also could keep the issue alive. Still, the apparent failure of U.S. beef imports to catch on as a major issue in local campaigning suggests it could just as easily fade from the limelight, if not before next month's vote, then probably soon thereafter. Tsai, the Taoyuan DPP official, suggested as much when he claimed that, had the beef pact been inked after the election, it wouldn't have created much of a stir. Many politicians, business leaders, and think tankers in Taipei across the political spectrum have suggested to us the same thing in the past few weeks. End Comment

